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Programs Provide Services to Ex-Offenders

By Joseph Young
WI Staff Writer

Next Tuesday, Feb. 6, the D.C. Re-Entry Initiative Program will hold a Health Summit at THEARC from 8:15 a.m. – 3:00 p.m. The summit will address the healthcare issues of ex-offenders. THEARC is located at 1901 Mississippi Avenue, SE.

"Health is very challenging for them to access. We are going to focus on healthcare and all of the related issues around it," said Rahim Jenkins, director of the D.C. Re-Entry Initiative, in an interview this week.

Keynote Speaker Rev. Renee Johnson gets the crowd on their feet, including program participant Denise Mayhew-Wright, during a forum held at the New Commandment Baptist Church last Saturday, Jan. 27.

"If we prepare them for employment, it doesn't do any good if they have issues of high blood pressure, diabetes or high cholesterol…If we can help them obtain a healthcare provider then we believe that helps

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them with their re-integration."

The Summit will include panel discussions and information from various agencies such as the D.C. Department of Mental Health. Previously incarcerated persons will learn about health systems and health insurance available to them. Insurance carriers will be on hand, and representatives from the Federal Bureau of Prisons will tell them about the continuity of health services available to individuals after they leave federal correctional facilities.

Through Unity Health Care, previously incarcerated person, referred to as PIPS, can receive continuous services once they are outside of correctional facilities.

A mobile health care unit will provide free health tests and screenings at the Summit, and more than a dozen other vendors also will participate, offering services and information.

The Summit will be useful to individuals like Wanda Ann [last name withheld]. She is 51-years-old and has been in and out of jails all of her adult life. Three years ago, she was released from a federal correctional facility in Danbury, Conn. where she served 12 months for a parole violation. With few belongings and a Greyhound bus ticket, she returned to Washington, where she was born and raised. Her first stop was at RAP, Inc., a drug treatment program where she spent 90 days.

Her drug of choice was heroin, which she started using when she was 18. After graduation from Anacostia Senior High School, she became pregnant, but was forced to have an abortion. The resentment she felt afterward led to her drug addiction, she said.

"Having the abortion left me angry and depressed," said Wanda Ann. She started running the streets, and met a 28-year-old man, who later became her boyfriend. He gave Wanda Ann her first snort of heroin, she said.

Wanda Ann shared her story with The Washington Informer last Saturday at another event held for ex-offenders. That event, "The Women's Re-Entry Forum: Life After Release" was sponsored by the Court Services and Offenders Supervision Agency of the District of Columbia (CSOSA). It was held at the New Commandment Baptist Church in NW. More than 100 women attended, sharing their testimonies, and gathering information and support.

"That first snort, oh my God, it was marvelous to me," Wanda Ann said. "It made me feel like I had no more worries. It took away everything that I was feeling."

Within about a month, she was addicted to heroin, and her boyfriend had her selling the drug for him.

"I didn't know at the time that I was getting hooked on it," said Wanda Ann, "until I started having these symptoms, my stomach hurting, my nose running, yawning, bowels breaking, stuff like that."

Wanda Ann's boyfriend was eventually imprisoned, and she was left to support her drug habit on her own. That's when she really took to the streets. A life of prostituting and stealing became the way she supported her heroin addiction. When she was in jail that was the only time she wasn't using heroin.

Since she has been out of jail for the pass three years, her life has been stable. She works at the National Institute of Health (NIH) as a housekeeper, and lives in a stable home with her new boyfriend. More importantly, she is staying away from drugs.

"She's doing great," said Marcia Davis, Brown's parole officer. "She goes to AA and other self-help meetings,

She also gets support from family and friends."

Wanda Ann can be counted as one of the luckier ones. Each year, 19,000 ex-offenders are released from D.C. jail back into the District and 2,500 from federal prisons. There are approximately 65,000 ex-offenders living in the District. Many of these ex-offenders go without adequate employment, education, housing or health care.

For more information call the D.C. Re-Entry Initiative at (202) 698-5655.